

## Remarks at the Award Ceremony for the National Teacher of the Year

May 11, 2000

**The President.** Thank you very much. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. Let me begin by welcoming you to the Rose Garden and saying, I'm grateful that it's not too hot and it's not too cold. Sounds like one of those books we used to read when I was 6 years old—it's just right. [Laughter] Actually, we got rained out here yesterday at an event. And we had two events earlier today, and it was quite warm. So this is—you're here at just the right time.

I'd also like to thank the representatives of the Marine Band who played for us today. This is their third event today, and they've done a great job. Thank you very much.

I want to thank Secretary Riley, my friend and co-worker for better education for well over 20 years now. Even my adversaries will concede that he is the finest Secretary of Education this country has ever had, and I am very grateful to him.

I welcome the other representatives of the Department of Education and the executive director of the Council of Chief State Schools, Gordon Ambach; Scholastic, Inc., Senior Vice President Ernie Fleishman and all those from Scholastic who are here. And I want to recognize the president of the National Education Association, Bob Chase, who has done a wonderful job representing all the teachers of our country here in Washington, including those in the AFT. And I think they would say the same thing. And we thank you for all the fights that you've waged for us, and with your friends in the AFT, and people who love education everywhere. We've had a good 7 years here, thanks in no small measure to you, sir. And we thank you very much.

We have here 54 or 55 State Teachers of the Year, 36 former National Teachers of the Year, and our present honoree, Marilyn Whirry of California. And I want to say a little more about her in a moment.

President Truman presented the first of these awards here at the White House almost half a century ago. And every year since, Presidents or members of their family have personally handed out this award to recog-

nize not only the awardee and the awardees but, indeed, all of our teachers. On that very first occasion, President Truman said, "Next to one's mother, a teacher has the greatest influence on what kind of a citizen a child grows up to be."

Every day, 5 days a week, 9 months a year, teachers have the future of America in their hands. They teach our children to read, to write, to calculate, to sing, to paint, to play, to listen, to question, to work with others, and to think for themselves. They excite our children's imagination, lift their aspirations, open their hearts, strengthen their values.

I imagine every one of us can recall the names and faces of teachers who influenced us profoundly; indeed, so profoundly that without them we wouldn't be sitting here or standing in the Rose Garden today. We tend to remember the teachers most who challenged us the most; the ones who held us to high standards and convinced us we could achieve; teachers who praised us when they knew we were doing our very best; and who motivated us, sometimes gently and sometimes not so gently, to do even better; teachers who watched with delight the amazement on our faces when we produced work we never imagined we were capable of.

For 35 years now, Dr. Marilyn Whirry has been that kind of teacher, instilling in her students a love of literature. Seniors at Mira Costa High School in Manhattan Beach, California, vie for spots in her advanced placement English class. Even freshmen and sophomores hope some day to join what are called the "Whirryites," in book-lined Room 19, to discuss Shakespeare and Camus, Toni Morrison and Dostoyevski.

Her teaching style, I understand, is like a softer, more nurturing version of Professor Kingsfield's in "The Paper Chase." She paces the room posing questions to each student, responding to each answer with still more questions, digging deeper and deeper into the toughest texts until their meanings are revealed. She believes there are no obstacles to learning that cannot be overcome through effort and high standards. And she lives by that belief.

A few years ago, she underwent treatment for cancer, yet almost never missed a day of work. She not only beat the cancer but that

year every one of her students passed the AP tests. She's traveled America giving workshops to educators on teaching standards-based reading and writing.

For the last 7 years, she's been Secretary Riley's appointee to the National Assessment Governing Board. I think I should point out that she was first appointed to NAGB by the previous administration, so admiration for her is bipartisan. *[Laughter]*

The role of teachers has never been more important to our society and our future than it is today—in a global economy that rewards what we know and what we can learn more than ever, with the largest and most diverse student population in our history, and with 2 million teachers set to retire in the next decade, and already a crying need to lower class sizes and modernize facilities.

Clearly, recruiting and retaining more and better teachers is one of the greatest challenges we face as a nation. And we see unusual efforts now being adopted all across the country. In the State of Mississippi, they just voted to raise teachers' salaries \$10,000. In California, they give big bonuses to people who come into teaching. And you'll see more and more of this as we recognize not only the imperative of having good teachers but also just the sheer challenge of replacing the retiring teachers as the corps of students continues to grow.

One of the things we have to do to meet that challenge is to do more to honor and respect our best teachers, like our honoree. Everyone who becomes a teacher recognizes on the front end that this is not the surest path to wealth. People who do it, in the end, do it and stay at it because they love it, because they find fulfillment in giving, in the spark of learning they see in children's eyes.

The least the rest of us can do is to pay them adequately, train them well, give them the facilities and support they need and the respect that they deserve. And that last intangible element was conclusion number one of the Survey of America's Top Teachers, released just this week by Scholastic, Inc., and the Council of Chief State School Officers. The survey also concluded if we want to recruit more and better teachers and hang on to those we have, we must pay them more.

More and more gifted young people start out teaching, but they don't stay as long as they used to, and that's a big challenge. Thanks to the longest running expansion in American history, most States have substantial budget surpluses now. They have to decide how best to use them. States, like the Nation, this year must decide what to do with this magic moment of prosperity in improving social conditions. If I were a Governor and I had a surplus, I'd give my teachers the pay they deserved, and I hope more and more States will do that.

We also know that the National Government has a role to play. I have proposed \$1 billion effort to help recruit, train, and support teachers, to invest more in teachers even as we demand more of them. I'm disappointed, yesterday, that Congress set in motion a budget that, I believe, strongly invests too little in our schools and expects and demands too little from them, a plan that ignores some of our schools' most pressing needs, from more well-trained teachers to more modern classrooms. We can and must do better, and we will.

Last week I took a school reform tour through four States. It was an amazing experience for me. I went to western Kentucky, and I went to Minnesota. I went to Iowa. I went to Ohio. I could have gone to anyplace, I suppose, and found much the same thing. But it was so moving for me to have a chance to demonstrate to the country, through the good offices of our friends in the media, that all children can learn and our schools are doing better. Test scores are up; many of our lowest performing schools are turning around.

Every teacher here today and every teacher across the country ought to be proud of the progress that is being made. You have proved that all students can learn. Now our task is to ensure that all students do learn, that they all receive the world-class education they need, they deserve, and the rest of us desperately need for them to have. If we continue to build on our progress, I have no doubt that we can fulfill that promise.

Let me just say one other thing about this that's not in the text, but one of the things that troubled me greatly when I became President in January of 1993 is that even a

lot of people who voted for me because they believed in what I was saying, didn't really believe we could turn the country around. They didn't really believe we would ever get rid of the deficit. They didn't really believe we would ever reduce the welfare rolls. They didn't really believe that we could make crime come down every year. And even though every single citizen knew some teacher that they just adored, they didn't really believe that on a sweeping national basis, we could improve the performance of our students. And now that we know, that imposes a special responsibility on us.

When I leave office, we're going to have paid off \$355 billion of the Nation's debt. We know we can get the country out of debt and still keep investing in education. We've got the crime rate coming down 8 years in a row; the welfare rolls are half what they were. But a lot of people still don't know that the schools, against increasing challenges, are doing better and better. And I'll just give you one example.

I was in Kentucky, in Owensboro, a little town in western Kentucky, in a school that was one of the 170 schools in 1996 identified as a low performing school. Within 2 years, 91 percent of the schools were off the list. As of last year, in 4 years, in a school with two-thirds of the kids eligible for free or reduced lunches, the number of children reading at or above grade level had gone from 12 to 57 percent; doing math at or above grade level had gone from 5 to 70 percent; doing science at or above grade level had gone from zero to 64 percent. The school ranked 18th in the State in overall performance, with two-thirds of the kids eligible for free or reduced lunch. And in Kentucky, 10 of the 20 best performing grade schools have over half the kids eligible for free or reduced lunch. Race, income, and region are not destiny, thanks to teachers and schools. And we need to get that out there.

And that's what you represent to me. You are the living embodiment that you get more from giving than taking in life. And I can't think of anybody who's given more. My only regret today is that I have never been in one of Marilyn Whirry's classes. [Laughter] So maybe we'll get the next best thing as I bring her up here and present her her award.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Teacher of the Year.

[At this point, the President presented the award to Ms. Whirry, who then made brief remarks and gave the President a crystal apple.]

**The President.** Thank you. Well, thank you. I have all kinds of questions I wanted to ask you, about Dostoyevski and Camus and—[laughter]

**Ms. Whirry.** Okay.

**The President.** —the last novel he wrote that's just been published. What did Toni Morrison mean when she said I was America's first black President? [Laughter] I thought it was a great compliment.

Let me tell you, I generally believe Presidents should not receive awards because the job is award enough. But I love this. And every day I have left here, this award will be on my desk in the Oval Office, and I hope you get to see it on television.

Thank you. Bless you all. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:28 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House.

### Statement on Congressional Action on Africa and Caribbean Basin Trade Legislation

May 11, 2000

I am pleased that Congress has completed action on historic legislation that will boost investment, growth, and opportunity in Africa and the Caribbean Basin, while improving the global competitive position of our own industries. This step reaffirms America's commitment to open trade and strengthens the partnership between the United States and our friends in Africa and the Caribbean Basin. It will encourage these nations to continue building open economies, bolster their efforts to alleviate poverty, and improve long-term prospects for democracy and stability around the world. I look forward to signing this measure into law and congratulate Members of Congress from both parties who have worked so hard to enact the "African Growth and Opportunity Act" and the Caribbean Basin trade enhancement legislation.